

Teachers' Cultural Differences: Case Studies Of Geography Teachers In Brisbane, Changchun And Hong Kong

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The primary purpose of this exploratory study is to identify variations in the ways in which individual teachers in different educational contexts interpret their curriculum and plan their lessons and in particular to explore the possibility that cultural differences as identified by Hofstede (1991) may be a contributing factor to understanding how teachers understand their work. "Educational reform" has become a catchphrase in the Anglo-American world, including the United States, Canada, Australia, and England and Wales, as well as in the Confucian Heritage Areas such as Mainland China, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Across the world, the educational reform measures being implemented are surprisingly similar. This paper describes a study of how geography teachers in Queensland, Australia, Hong Kong, and Changchun, China, plan their lessons and curriculum. From classroom observations and interviews with the teachers involved, we confirmed marked differences in each location regarding their cultural traits of power distance, individualist and collectivist preference and uncertainty tolerance, and that these traits appear to be highly influential in their curriculum planning. Despite the small scale of this study, we contend that there are good reasons for caution before national education systems import policies and curriculum reform initiatives from other countries for unthinking adoption.

Key words: cultural differences, teacher decision making, geography teaching

Introduction

In the past two decades, "educational reform" has become a catchphrase in the Anglo-American world, including the United States, Canada, Australia, and England and Wales, as well as in the Confucian Heritage Areas such as Mainland China, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. As writers such as Dimmock and Lee (2000), O'Donoghue and

Dimmock (1998) have emphasised, this reform movement has focused on the quality of school leadership, management, and governance on the one hand, and curriculum, teaching, and learning on the other. Of particular interest at present is the remarkable consistency of political statements to the effect that in order for a nation to remain internationally competitive, its schools must focus on producing skilled graduates for the workforce and that henceforth, educational reform will ensure that any particular country will become "a smart state" or a "clever country".

Across the world, the educational reform measures being implemented are surprisingly similar. On the implementation side, teachers are placed in a pivotal position and are required to undertake the work of delivering high-quality teaching and learning for students to meet the curriculum standards set by governments. Furthermore, such political posturing has been

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linked to demands for increased use of technology in schools across the world. As Lankshear and Snyder (2000) and Cuban (2004) point out, teachers are pushed more and more to adopt Information Communication Technologies (ICT) in their teaching.

However, a number of researchers such as Dimmock and Walker (1998) have warned that these curriculum changes have not taken issues of culture into consideration. With this in mind, we attempt to explore how teachers in places with different cultural background interpreted and responded to the calls for curriculum reform which are being introduced in many places. Based on classroom observation and teacher interviews, the research team comes to a tentative conclusion that there are significant differences between, as well as commonalities among, geography teachers in Changchun, Hong Kong and Brisbane. We make a plea for greater attention and respect to be paid to the effects of teacher culture in our endeavors to reform, and hopefully to improve, the education offered to our children.

Commonalities Of Educational Reform Across Various Countries

Change, like poverty, is always with us, and educational and curriculum reform have been called for almost since the inception of formal education. Taking the single curriculum area of geography as an example, the United States introduced the "High School Geography Project" in the 1960s in the light of the challenge of Sputnik (Stoltman, 1992). In England and Wales, three large and well-funded geography curriculum projects, namely *Geography for the Young School Leaver*, *Geography 14–18* and *Geography 16–19* were launched in the 1970s (Rawling, 2001). Hong Kong, although it has not had similar large-scale geography projects, introduced a new A-level geography curriculum which involved a paradigm shift to a landscape-ecosystem approach in 1981 (Fung & Lee, 1987). As a final example, Geography as an independent school subject was revived in Mainland China in the 1970s after the Cultural Revolution (Leung, 1991). More recently, many jurisdictions have introduced variations on the theme of integrated social studies, and some are in the process of dismantling such curricula in the face of on-going criticisms (The Australian Newspaper, May, 2007)

Most recently, national leaders are making pronouncements to the effect that since societies are changing, so also should our schools and curriculum (Hargreaves, 2003; Kelly, 2004). The rhetoric usually includes statements to the effect that in

the "Information Age," the skills of the populace needed for national (economic) survival must adjust accordingly. There is almost always reference to international competition in "global markets." Not a few political leaders have stated their aim to lead their nation towards "clever country" status, as if the question of how to best educate our children were a new one.

However, both the pace and scale of curriculum reform in many countries have increased dramatically over the past twenty years or so. The publication of "A nation at risk" in 1982 and later "Education 2000" in 1992 marked the start of a new round of curriculum reform in the United States (Eisner, 2002). In England, the introduction of a National Curriculum in 1986 and its subsequent modifications have brought radical changes in the school curriculum (Kelly, 2004; Moon, 2001). In the other hemisphere, Taiwan has launched extensive and fundamental curriculum reform in the mid-1990s (Ou, 2000), as have Mainland China and Hong Kong (Lam, 2001) while similar attempts at initiating a national curriculum and educational reform were made at the federal level in Australia in the early and mid-1990s.

In terms of levels of government control, the changes being introduced appear to be different. For example, while the introduction of the National Curriculum in England was mandated at the individual subject area level, in Australia, a series of key learning areas were developed at the national level for detailed implementation at state and territory level, both of which represented a move from school-based curriculum (albeit with central assessment in the case of England and Wales) to a more centrally controlled curriculum (Brady & Kennedy, 1999; Lawton, 1996; Moon, 2001). In contrast, in Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea, where previously education was very much a centrally administered and controlled endeavour, governments are now apparently encouraging teachers to adopt more professional responsibility for designing specific curricula for their students at the individual class level, again, often within centrally specified guidelines regarding "learning outcomes" or examination syllabuses (Lam, 2001; Ou, 2001; Zhang, 2001).

Despite the differences that are noted above, Dimmock and Lee (2000) argue that the curriculum reforms in various places have so much in common that they can be labeled as a "New curriculum." They suggest that among the changes constituting the new curriculum are the following: (a) a shift away from a teaching syllabus-oriented curriculum to a focus on student learning outcomes, (b) an attempt to individualize and personalize the curriculum, (c) an effort to include special

education students in mainstream classes, (d) a concern that all students-irrespective of age, ethnicity, and gender-receive a valued curriculum to which they are entitled, (e) more systematic and accurate assessment procedures, including profiling of individual student progress against benchmarks and expected standards at key stages, (f) an emphasis on higher-order skills, such as problem solving, communicating, critical thinking and creativity, (g) the adoption of particular teaching methodologies thought to be effective, and (h) a priority to integrate computer technology into the curriculum as a major teaching and learning tool (Dimmock & Lee, 2000)

Dimmock and Lee (2000) put forward the propositions that implementing this new curriculum requires “adaptable, flexible leadership, management, and organizational structures” which are simply non-existent (p.333). The present researchers would like to argue that the focus on Western (and perhaps more explicitly, U.S.-style) “management” implied by this statement is unwarranted, and that the apparent failures of so many of the “new curriculum” implementations internationally require explanations that go much further than this¹ and must be based on a more sympathetic and respectful examination of the professional mores of teachers, rather than on an implied criticism of teacher intransigence.

Of particular interest are the origins, diffusion patterns, and speed of dissemination of educational reform innovations. Elmore (1995) cites Tyack who

has characterized the current interest in school restructuring as a contemporary instance of a long-standing process he calls “tinkering towards utopia,” in which competing political interests use the policy process to express their views about how schools should operate. These views often have less to do with the details of teaching practice and school organization than with making schools responsible to particular political interests. (p. 357)

In terms of the origin of reforms, Cuban (2001) cites a survey of high-tech employees in Silicon Valley, California, in which 30% agreed with the statement: “I enjoy living in a place that’s changing the world.” He believes that many such workers hold a strong belief that the technology project will make millions of people’s lives better than they are now. When considered in the context of *The Economist’s* survey mentioned above, there seems to be some evidence that they may be correct. Cuban suggests that the logic of the beliefs may be as follows: (a) change makes a better society, (b) technology brings about change, and (c) therefore, technology makes a better society.

On the other hand, Lankshear and Snyder (2000) refer to “chilling evidence” of the nexus between the computer industry, mass media, the corporate business world, the OECD, and neo-liberal politicians, bureaucrats and advisers. These writers believe that such interest groups are determined to give schooling a commercial “make-over” and open it up to privatized provision, thus turning schools into renewed “ideology machines” to promote the development of economically motivated, self-interested individuals. They cite a ministry of education official in a Canadian province who said, “I think there are two essentials for kindergarten. The first is to get them ready for keyboarding. The other is to get these little kids to start thinking of themselves as ‘Me, Inc’” (p. xv).

It is our contention that teachers have a pivotal role to play in the development and implementation of any educational reform movement. As Elmore (1996) puts it, “A key intervening variable in the success of reform policies, then, seems to be the existence of people who understand how to translate reform ideas into pedagogical strategies for both practitioners and students” (p. 502).

If teachers do not carry out what the policy makers suggest, then curriculum reform amounts to little more than superficial, cosmetic change (Fullan, 2007). However, to typify teachers as conservative, recalcitrant and unwilling to change, is to ignore their seminal position in the process and perhaps worse, to deny the very professionalism that educational system leaders purport to wish to encourage and enhance. Teachers’ responses to curriculum reform and their practices in work are shaped by their beliefs and values which are in turn strongly influenced by their culture. The places where this “new curriculum” has been introduced have by no means similar cultures. Thus, it is not unreasonable to predict that the responses of teachers from different places to these reforms will by no means similar. If this assertion is correct, it would have strong implications for the planning and implementation of the current wave of curriculum reform which is affecting so many countries. In the current study, we make a very preliminary attempt to link Hofstede’s theory of cultural differences to observed differences in teachers’ interpretations of their work. We contend that curriculum researchers need to reveal the culture of teachers in different places.

The Importance Of Culture In The World Of Education

Anthropologists have warned for many years that people

are usually unaware of the culture that surrounds them because culture appears as usual life, what seems normal or natural. The statement that “if a fish were to become an anthropologist, the last thing it would discover would be water” is attributed to Margaret Mead and reflects the situation perfectly. People tend to assume that the approach to education that we experienced or which we practice is “normal.” We may protest that we are aware of shortcomings, and accept the need for some change, but fundamentally, this usually implies some tinkering on the margins rather than a fundamental re-think. Why this may be so is explained by Bohannon (1995) as follows. We “cannot even think about culture except through the categories of thought that we have learned from the culture we grew up in and the one in which we have been trained” (p. 4). From this perspective, culture means “sense-making.” It may be defined as:

the meanings which people create, and which create people, as members of societies (Hannerz, 1992, p.3)

He further elaborates,

Homo Sapiens is the creature who “makes sense.” She [sic] literally produces sense through her experience, interpretation, contemplation, and imagination, and she cannot live in the world without it. The importance of this sense-making in human life is reflected in a crowded conceptual field: ideas, meaning, information, wisdom, understanding, intelligence, sensibility, learning, fantasy, opinion, knowledge, belief, myth, tradition ... (Hannerz, 1992, p.3)

Why, then, is this concept of culture applied to what occurs in schools? Bruner (1996) identifies culture as one of the key ways in which curriculum can be described and interpreted. He writes:

Schools have always been highly selective with respect to the uses of mind they cultivate — which uses are to be considered “basic,” which “frills,” which the school’s responsibility and which the responsibility of others, which for girls and which for boys, which for working-class children and which for “swells.” Some of this selectivity was doubtless based on considered notions about what the society required or what the individual needed to get along. Much of it was a spillover of folk or social class tradition. Even the more recent and seemingly obvious objective of equipping all with “basic literacy” is premised on moral-political grounds, however pragmatically those grounds may be justified. School curricula and classroom “climates” always reflect inarticulate cultural values as well as explicit plans; and these values are never far removed

from considerations of social class, gender, and the prerogatives of social power. (p. 27)

Joseph (2000) emphasizes the point when she writes: “Curriculum conceptualized as culture educates us to pay attention to belief systems, values, behaviors, language, artistic expression, the environment in which education takes place, power relationships, and most importantly, the norms that affect our sense about what is right or appropriate.” (p.19):

However, while much has been made of what is sometimes termed “the culture of the classroom,” little attention has been paid to the culture of the teachers whose life work is to manage that classroom or even to determine whether the term “culture” may have different meanings in the two contexts. Hofstede (1995) defines culture as:

the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another. The “category of people” can be a nation, region, or ethnic group (national etc. culture), women versus men (gender culture), old versus young (age group and generation culture), a social class, a profession or occupation (occupational culture), a type of business, a work organization or part of it (organizational culture), or even a family” (p. 150).

This definition has been the foundation of work by a number of educational researchers (see for example, Dimmock & Walker, 1998). However, it is the contention of the current writers that Hofstede’s work has even further significance for the understanding of teachers’ work and attitudes to curriculum change.

Hofstede (1995) cites the work of Inkeles and Levinson in 1969 who confirmed that all societies, modern and traditional, face the same basic problems, with only their solutions differing. The problems are:

1. Relation to authority.
2. Conception of self, in particular: the relationship between individual and society, and the individual’s concept of masculinity and femininity.
3. Ways of dealing with conflicts, including the control of aggression and the expression of feelings.

On this basis, Hofstede examined survey data on the values of people working for the IBM company around the world and found almost perfectly matched samples similar in all respects except nationality. On the basis of the large survey data set which encompassed 50 countries, he refined the categories of Inkeles and Levinson to identify four sets of differences in handling social life:

1. social inequality, including the relationship with authority;
2. the relationship between the individual and the group;
3. concepts of masculinity and femininity: the social implications of having been born a boy or a girl; and
4. ways of dealing with uncertainty, relating to the control of aggression and the expression of emotions.

Later he identified a fifth dimension of differences amongst national cultures: one which opposes a long-term orientation in life to a short-term orientation.

For the purposes of the current investigation, these five dimensions may be summarized as follows: (a) power distance, (b) collectivism vs. individualism, (c) masculinity vs. femininity, (d) uncertainty avoidance; and (e) long-term vs. short-term orientation.

Hofstede (1995) comments that the fact that this fifth dimension was not identified earlier may be attributed to the “Western mindset” of researchers of culture to that date. The current paper is at least partly the result of the present researchers’ many years of discussion regarding their own world views.

The Link between cultures and teachers

The concept of occupational culture has been the subject of many researchers’ interest since the early 1980s. Goodman’s (1983) study of teachers’ subject identity is a case in point. In many other sub-fields in education, such as parenting, the influence of national differences has captured the attention of many researchers. Stevenson and Stigler (1992) conducted studies on why Japanese and Chinese students performed better than their counterparts in America. Watkins and Biggs (1996) also identified significant cultural differences in learning between Western and Asian students. In the field of parenting, striking differences in parents’ values and commitment to young people’s education are obvious (Cheng & Wong, 1996; Lam, Ho & Wong, 2002). Cultural differences have been used to explain why Confucian Heritage Area students do so well in international student achievement studies such as the Third International Mathematics and Science Study.

Further, the importance of culture has captured much attention in the field of educational administration. Hallinger and Leithwood (1996) argue: “Culture, like the conceptual constructs offered by feminist and critical theorists, entails donning a new set of theoretical lenses for viewing practice”

(p. 100), while they also warn that Western theories on educational leadership “have been transferred across cultures with relatively little concern for their cultural validity” (p. 101).

However, despite the clear mandate for such investigations given by Hofstede’s definition above, and his identification of five dimensions of culture, while most studies to date, such as that by Little and McLaughlin (1993) on teacher culture that have focused on the role of teachers have viewed teaching as an occupation, there appear to have been few studies to compare the cultures of the teachers themselves in difference places. We contend that this is a serious omission, given that Hallinger and Leithwood (1996) citing Getzel et al., have pointed out that the culture of a place affects the ethos and values which in turn shape social behaviour. It is therefore postulated that culture forms a context of teachers’ work in the following ways:

1. Culture shapes what people perceived teachers’ role should be.
2. Culture affects how teachers perceive their independence as professionals.
3. Culture shapes teachers’ perception of their goals.

Research Methodology

Although the importance of national culture has been widely accepted, it seems that in the field of curriculum reform, there is an absence of this awareness. It is not uncommon for curriculum academics in a wide variety of different cultures to quote theories found and developed in Western countries, and especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, to support wide implantation of specific curriculum reforms. Academics are not alone in this. Policy makers do the same. As Dimmock and Walker (1998) point out, “Education systems around the globe tend to reflect Western theories and practices with little consideration of their cultural fit” (p. 561).

With this in mind, the research team decided to carry out an exploratory study with a limited number of teachers to reveal:

1. How the teachers in different places plan and deliver their lessons.
2. What their beliefs and attitudes towards curriculum, teaching and learning were.
3. To what extent there were commonalities in their pattern of work and educational beliefs in the three different places.

This comparative study was conducted in Hong Kong, Brisbane, and Changchun.² The reasons for choosing these three places are partly due to the normal sphere of activity of the researchers. However, the more important reason in this context is that they represent three very different social cultures. Brisbane, on the east coast of Australia, is strongly influenced by Anglo-American culture. Changchun, in the northeast of China, is far from such Western influences and firmly within the Chinese cultural setting. Hong Kong, though a Chinese city, has been strongly influenced by Western culture (Cheng & Wong, 1996) both as a result of its former colonial status and the freedom of its people to travel elsewhere in the world.³ A comparison of these places could reveal the influence of culture.

Because of the background of the researchers, geography teachers were chosen to be participants in this study. In each case study city, eight teachers were invited to take part. The schools and teachers were chosen to reflect a range of schools with different catchment areas and student socio-economic characteristics. Moreover, the teachers studied were varied in experience and qualifications to reflect better the situation of the population. For example, the characteristics of the teachers studied in Changchun are shown in Table 1.

Teachers participated in the study voluntarily and were asked to show the researchers a "normal lesson". Interviews were conducted prior to the lesson as well as after the lesson. In the pre-observation interview, teachers were asked to discuss their attitudes and opinions of the curriculum or syllabus within which they were working, and after the lesson, they were asked to discuss their reasons for designing and

conducting that particular lesson as well as broader issues such as catering for individual differences, the problems they faced, their working habits, interaction among colleagues, and their autonomy in planning lessons and their individual curricula. Our justification for adopting this approach is based in the work of both Hofstede (1995) and Dimmock and Walker (1998) who have pointed out that it is difficult to measure, gauge or even describe cultural traits, partly because they are so closely integrated in our own and our interviewees' daily work habits and practices. Therefore, in the present study, we started from observing teachers' actions in their classrooms, and then asked them to reflect on their personal and professional behaviors. From their practices in the classroom and through the interviews, and through conversations between ourselves, coming as we do from Western (an Australian of English background) and Eastern (a Chinese living in Hong Kong) traditions, with each of us having visited the cultural homelands of the other on numerous occasions, we contend that it is possible to infer their professional practices, beliefs, and values.

All interviews were conducted in the mother tongue of the interviewees and took the form of a professional conversation between equals. The researchers were careful at all times to avoid being cast as 'experts' or 'inspectors' coming in to observe and evaluate teachers' performance, but rather as interested parties – from a different culture – who wished to learn from the experiences of the teachers as experts. The discussions were audio taped with consent for later transcription. The researchers made personal notes as they observed the teachers in action in their classrooms as the

Table 1
The Characteristics of the Teachers Studied

Teacher	Academic standard of the school*	School facilities	Teacher's academic qualification	Teaching experience
A	High	Very good	Bachelor	Less than 5 years
B	Above average	Good	Bachelor	Less than 5 years
C	Above average	Good	Bachelor	Over 5 years
D	Below average	Average	Bachelor	Over 5 years
E	Below average	Average	Bachelor	Over 5 years
F	Average	Average	Bachelor	Over 5 years
G	Average	Average	Bachelor	Over 5 years
H	Below average	Poor	Associate degree	Over 10 years

Note. This is based on the classification system used by the government. In China, junior secondary schools are divided into Type A, B, C, and D based on the quality of student intake.

basis for input into the discussions that followed and further notes on their emerging understandings during the conversations that followed.

When taking notes of the classroom teaching, we focused on the choice of content, teaching materials used, the pattern of interaction between teacher and pupils, as well as the teaching strategies adopted. Based on the notes taken, each lesson was analyzed individually, trying to identify its structure and teaching methods used. It was found that each lesson could be divided into segments in which certain teaching methods dominated. From these, characteristics of the lessons were drawn. For example, in Changchun, nearly all the teachers relied heavily on their textbook and the teaching activities were mostly centred around the teachers, while in Brisbane, the teachers were anxious to emphasize how little any textbooks available influenced their classroom behaviors.

The interview transcripts were read to identify relevant themes. Tables were constructed to trim and categorize the data and to confirm and modify the themes identified.

The data reveal that there are significant commonalities among teachers in the same area. Instead of presenting the findings of these commonalities in a checklist manner, we, generated general patterns of practices, beliefs, and values of teachers in each city and identified and amalgamated them to create a composite “typical teacher” to represent each cultural group. These three “archetypal teachers” were then used as the basis for identifying intercultural differences. It should be noted that this does not mean all the teachers were identical to the “typical teachers”. There are some differences among the teachers observed which were related to their personal characteristics such as level of teacher training and academic competency. In Changchun, a teacher who was the only teacher did not have a bachelor degree, was much less confident. However, we find that the commonalities among them are so obvious that we are able to use them to create the archetypal teachers described in the section below. Nevertheless, it is not the intention of the research team to claim that the following archetypal teachers as representative of all the geography teachers in the three places. Our intention is to use them to illustrate the fact that there are obvious commonalities reflecting cultural traits held by the teachers in the three case cities.

Findings

The researchers developed three models of archetypal

teachers to represent the teachers who responded in each of the three cities. Ms. Sun represents teachers in Hong Kong, Mr. Au represents teachers in the Chinese city of Changchun, and Sue represents the teachers in and around Brisbane, Australia.

Ms. Sun

Ms. Sun represents the eight teachers from Hong Kong who participated in this study. She has been a geography teacher in a secondary school with student ability being slightly above average for just over seven years since she received her bachelor’s degree and teacher training qualification. She is probably at or near the peak of her classroom teaching career.

A typical lesson observed might have been on the topic: Suburbanization in the United States which is one of the topics in the Secondary 1 unit (for twelve year olds) — “Moving in? Moving out?” According to the curriculum, in this unit, she would have to cover where the major cities are in the United States and why people would move from the old urban areas to the suburban areas. In such a unit, Ms. Sun did not strictly adhere to the curriculum and the textbook. Instead, she started off the lesson by asking the students why they moved to the new town where the school was. The reason for doing this, she explained, was to make the topic more relevant to her students as they had usually moved from the old urban areas of Hong Kong to the new town where the school was located. After this, she related the push and pull factors of people movement to the case of cities in the United States. Before the lesson ended, she also introduced the concept of megalopolis which was a result of extensive suburbanization.

Ms. Sun explained that she felt that the teacher’s main responsibility was to help students understand what was in the mandated curriculum. As the textbooks were written according to the curriculum designed by the Government, it was safe to follow the suggested content. However, she found the textbook explanations of that content a bit difficult for her students, so she often rearranged the sequence and the structure of the textbook to make it easier for the students. However, she not only relied on the materials contained in the textbooks, but also had the habit of collecting other teaching materials from reference books and newspapers. When she visited other places during her holidays, she would take photographs and buy rock specimens and other artifacts for classroom use.

Despite the fact that Ms. Sun taught a group of above

average students, she shared the problem experienced by most of her colleagues, particularly those in schools that served those less academically able, of failing to meet all the content requirements of the curriculum. She thus had to make the difficult decision of where to trim it. The major consideration in this decision was related to issues of linkage with the senior secondary curriculum. Topics and concepts that were to be developed in the senior secondary curriculum were to be kept and taught. To do otherwise was to place students' results in the public examination in jeopardy.⁴

The school management gave Ms. Sun great freedom in deciding what and how to teach. Of course, she was required to ensure that her students would succeed in the public examination. The panel chairman of her subject was very nice and supportive, letting her observe his lessons. However, Ms. Sun was reluctant to let either her panel head or her other colleagues observe her class in action as she was frightened. (Why she should be frightened, despite her successful teaching and examination-success record, was never totally clarified.) There was little exchange of teaching materials or teaching ideas among her colleagues. In the subject panel meetings, Ms. Sun and her colleagues simply decided the teaching schedule and left it to each individual teacher to design his/her own class presentations so long as the content was covered. The standardization of the content coverage was, of course, important because students in the same year were required to sit the same school examination.

When she was asked whether she supported the idea of school-based curriculum development under which teachers were granted the autonomy to design their own curriculum and teaching materials, and there would not be any textbook, Ms. Sun responded:

I object to it, of course. We don't have enough time [to do it]. Time is a key factor. At present, I am already working hard. I have to adapt the textbook. If teachers are required to design their own curriculum, the quality depends on the ability of the teacher. If the teacher fails to design a good curriculum, students will suffer. Students' results depend heavily on their teacher! Moreover, if there is not a set of standards, the variations among schools will be huge. I would not support this move!

She was also against the idea of curriculum integration. She admitted that she did not know what an integrated humanities subject would cover, and even if such a course were to be presented to her in the detail of content usually provided in Hong Kong, she simply believed that she would not have the knowledge or confidence to teach it. Again, this

is despite her demonstrated abilities in interpreting and presenting the currently mandated geography syllabus.

Ms. Sun, representing the better mid-career teachers of Hong Kong, reveals the following characteristics:

1. She accepts and respects a centrally developed curriculum and is against the idea of school-based curriculum development on the grounds that her job is to teach rather than to develop curricula.
2. While she believes that she must present her material in such a way as to interest and motivate her students, and to help them relate their learning to their daily lives, her fundamental task is to help her students get through the examination.
3. While trying to ensure the best possible chance of examination success, she still feels the need to adapt the centrally developed curriculum to make teaching more effective and to cater for students' aptitude, background, and learning ability.
4. She does not welcome changes, the results of which are uncertain. Both curriculum integration and school-based curriculum development are cases in point. On the contrary, improvements to teaching that may be readily incorporated are welcome. For example, the new junior secondary geography curriculum is very different from the old curriculum in both content and approach. The new curriculum places much more emphasis on environmental issues and requires teachers to adopt an enquiry approach, and, despite these changes, was warmly welcomed by Ms. Sun.
5. In planning how to adapt the mandated curriculum for her classes, Ms. Sun not only considered short-term factors, but also thought carefully about the articulation of the junior geography classes with the senior curriculum.

Mr. Au

Mr. Au represents the teachers in Changchun. After getting a bachelor degree and teacher qualification, he has served in a secondary school with average student input for eight years. He was invited to show the researchers a "normal lesson"⁵ during which he taught a lesson on railways in China. He virtually covered all the major points as shown in the textbook except deleting the point on "The linkage between railway lines and natural resources."⁶ He had also followed the teaching recommendations made in the references of teachers which went together with the textbook. However, he

did alter the flow slightly and also added some extra teaching points into their lessons.

In the interview, Mr. Au admitted that he tended to follow the textbooks and teacher references:

We work according to the traditional model. We follow the teaching syllabus, the suggested teaching materials. Although we did try to adapt today's lesson, basically, we followed the track of the teaching syllabus and the textbook.

Even though he has made some minor modifications, he emphasized that the changes did not affect the line of following the curriculum. He explained it in the following dialogue:

Interviewer: Were you afraid that the students would not be able to meet the requirements?

Mr. Au: No, this wouldn't happen. There would not be such a problem. The modifications [I made] were in line with the schedule. I modified the content within the curriculum and textbook framework. (Interview, Teacher C).

Mr. Au quoted two reasons for following the textbook:

(a) the adherence to the textbook was a requirement of the municipal education inspectors; and (b) the control of the public examination.

These two reasons, though valid, should not have been so restrictive. Since the late 1990s, the Chinese Government has encouraged teachers to develop quality education, that is, to cater better for the needs and abilities of students. Moreover, the public examination on geography which junior secondary students had to face was very easy. It was not a high-stake examination as students were only required to get a pass. To the above average or average students, this was easy. It was interesting to find that teachers did not fully utilize their autonomy to adapt the curriculum.

Mr. Au, though a well-qualified teacher with rich teaching experience, did not want to adopt a more liberal stance in designing his teaching. He still felt that it was necessary to cover all the content of the textbook and help students prepare for the public examination. As the examination required students to memorize the teaching points in the textbook, he adopted a teacher-centered approach which he considered the most effective way to ensure success in this examination.

These findings indicate the relaxation of public examination pressure and the inspection control have not "liberalized" the teachers. Mr. Au still believed in following the textbook and curriculum instead of adapting curriculum either to his own interests or to those of his students. Such

beliefs are in line with the cultural traits of Asian culture of "high power distance" and high uncertainty avoidance (Hallinger & Kantamara, 2000).

This need to follow government policy was also reflected in the way Mr. Au adapted his teaching. He had included much map work in his lesson, the reason for doing so being to meet the call for developing quality education which urged teachers to place greater emphasis on students' all-round development (see, Liu, 1997).

This did not mean that students were completely left out in planning his lesson. He did focus more on the railway linkage between Changchun and other cities as it would make it more relevant to students' daily life. This was seen by Mr. Au as a means to help maintain good student behaviour in the classroom. However, in terms of importance, this was not the prime consideration. Student satisfaction and interest were always subjugated to the outcomes of the public examination.

Sue

Sue represents the eight Queensland teachers interviewed for this study. The eight teachers worked in private or state schools. Sue teaches students of all abilities, since there is no streaming on ability grounds in Queensland schools, including students who previously would have been educated in "special schools." At senior levels (16–17 year olds), geography is often regarded as one of the easier optional subjects to choose. As is the case with teachers from Mainland China and Hong Kong, Sue is a graduate in geography, trained as a teacher and in mid-career. Because of the recent transition from a mainly subject-oriented curriculum based on established discipline areas to the Queensland interpretation of the Australian national curriculum-defined key learning area of "Studies of Society and Environment" (known locally as SOSE), which was mandated for teaching in all Queensland state primary and high schools in 2000, Sue teaches a mixture of geography and SOSE classes.⁷

In describing how she approached her lesson, Sue emphasized its structure since she was aware of the problems of keeping students interested and on-task for the duration of the 70–90 minutes' timetabled periods that are becoming more common in schools. She said:

what we try to do with our planning for a lesson like that is, because it's a 70-minute lesson, try to make sure that there's a variety of different activities in there so if you're trying to talk for 70 minutes, that's fairly hard work, so you might talk for 5 or 10 minutes, then

there'll be some student-oriented task and its their turn to get on with some work.

She observed that: "There's quite a few kids that are quite low achievers there — like the little girl in the front — Victoria — I'm not sure what it is, but she is nearly mentally disabled — and I think it is really important to cater for all those students in the class."

Sue had prepared a detailed work sheet for her class to help them prepare a series of climate graphs. However, she acknowledged that: "They won't all do it. They won't be able to understand the concepts that we're looking for but I think it's important to challenge kids — even low achievers can do some fantastic things."

Sue acknowledged the importance of working as part of a group to develop new teaching units collaboratively. When asked about the approach to a new unit, she said:

Bronwyn [the Head of department] normally gives us an outline. Like Grade 8 and we can add things to it. So it's fantastic. I think it's really important just to see what other people are doing and that you're on the right track, otherwise you all go off on different tangents and end up with different things so, yes, I really enjoyed that.

In terms of producing teaching resources, on the other hand, she was not entirely happy with the lack of structure that could result.

I think it's important that kids have hands on books and hands on primary sources of information and stuff like that ... I read the newspapers daily to find any current articles and file those so that students can see the relevance of what we're doing to the real world. And sometimes we cut and paste sources ... yes ... so it's a lot of work.

On the other hand, Sue also regarded the personal costs of school-based curriculum development as being high. She said:

This is my ninth year [of teaching] and for the first maybe six years, I just lived for school. I just had that passion. It becomes your life and ... I mean ... that's fine but I think ... yes ... eventually it destroys your life and I suppose that as you get older other things become important as well.

When asked about the nature of SOSE compared with separate history or geography teaching, Sue described school programs which have been called SOSE but organized as half a year of geography and half a year of history and others where the teachers deny this distinction but where, "if you look at actually what the kids are doing, it's still you know,

broken into history and geography and I think that's got to be overcome before the subject itself can take off properly."

Although she acknowledged that the theory behind the SOSE syllabus was exciting, Sue admitted that she:

actually found it a bit tricky trying to make sure that we're meeting the requirements of the syllabus because the statements are so broad, I feel a little bit, like I'm trying to work out what they were thinking when they wrote it rather than actually just picking up the statements and running with them.

Sue apparently is not too concerned with the fine detail of the mandated syllabus, and neither is she overly concerned with the nature of the disciplines involved in her curriculum. Behaviour management and equality of opportunity among the students of wide-ranging abilities in her class appear to be her greatest concern, and she regards almost any pedagogical approach that has the potential to meet either or both of these priorities as useful in her work. However, she has still not adopted a totally democratic approach as shown by her desire for all students to achieve similarly presented work books.

Discussion

As noted above, it is not the intention of the research team to claim that the above three vignettes represent all the geography teachers in their respective cities much less than to represent all the school teachers covering various subjects. The research team is fully aware that there may be differences among subjects (see for example, Goodson, 1983), and the small sample size covered in the present study could in no way be statistically generalized. However, with the careful choice of the samples, we contend that it is not unreasonable to argue that the findings can reflect the characteristics of teachers' work and their beliefs in the three places studied and may thus reflect a conceptual generalization that may be helpful in future planning and analysis of curricula.

When we read these vignettes representing teachers in the three education systems, it would be easy to apply a deficit model of teaching by which the weaknesses in the implementation processes of curriculum reform are blamed on the inadequacies of the teachers. For example, the Hong Kong teachers would be criticized for being overly concerned with examination success, Mainland Chinese teachers for being too scared to vary from the government-mandated textbook approach and, perhaps Australian teachers for being too egalitarian and "laid-back," having little concern apparently either for achieving and maintaining high

academic standards, or for being undisciplined and failing to comply with the educational wishes of the government of the day. If such an approach to interpreting the data is adopted, it is hardly surprising that teachers are so frequently defined in curriculum and educational change literature as “the problem” preventing curriculum reform and the benefits that policy makers are sure will flow from it. If teachers are defined in this way, it is further not surprising that governments around the world spend huge time and effort in introducing processes designed to coerce teachers into complying with their policies. Such processes may often be presented as “re-education” through in-service education, encouragement to become more “professional,” ever more demanding work requirements or levels of accountability through student assessment.

However, the “story” of these teachers can also be read in another way - one which acknowledges and respects the cultures from which they come, and appreciates that cultural congruence between teacher, student and societal expectations might, in fact, be of greater durability and long-term benefit to both students and their societies. If we accept Tyack’s suggestion cited above that many curriculum reforms originate when “competing political interests use the policy process to express their views about how schools should operate,” then it is surely reasonable to accept teachers’ reservations as emanating from their personal practical experiences and the cultural heritage which is shared with their students and with the wider societies within which they work.

It is not too difficult to demonstrate that the teachers of the three cities included in this study exhibit significant differences in their practices, beliefs, and values. If these differences are considered in the context of Hofstede’s five dimensions of culture, the differences are even more obvious.

In terms of power-distance, the teachers in Changchun are quite prepared to take orders and follow instructions from the central government. Indeed, these teachers did not question or challenge the goals and aims of education set by the government at all. In contrast, the Brisbane teachers appeared quite prepared to criticize and re-define emerging government policies and curricula if they, in any way, conflicted with what they believed to be their students’ best interests or their own professional judgment. Hong Kong teachers demonstrate a position somewhere in between whereby, on the one hand, they accept that the teachers’ role is to help students to succeed in the public examinations and on the other, they feel the responsibility to adapt their teaching to meet the needs, aptitudes, and ability of the

students. They appear ready to accept that centrally developed curricula can and should be adapted providing that the adaptations do not affect the outcomes of the public examination. In the context of this dimension, it would seem as equally inappropriate and counter-productive for central authorities in Mainland China to withdraw support from teachers on the grounds that they should be “more professional” as for Queensland authorities to impose ever more rigorously the assessment of “learning outcomes” on teachers there under the same guise.

Hofstede’s reference to collectivism and individualism has no political meaning, since it refers to the group rather than the state. Hofstede differentiates between those societies in which ties between individuals are loose, with everyone expected to look after himself/herself and his/her immediate family and those in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong cohesive in-groups which continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. In the context of the current study, Hong Kong teachers appear to work in a generally isolated manner. They seldom exchange ideas and materials. Teachers do meet occasionally in subject panel meetings to agree on teaching schedules and administrative matters, but what happens inside their classrooms is private between themselves and their students. In this they appear very similar to their Brisbane colleagues who also work very independently. They usually design their lessons by themselves without exchanging ideas with, or having input from colleagues. In contrast, in Changchun, like other cities in Mainland China, the staff development system is much more elaborate and well-developed. Every week, teachers have one half-day outside the classroom for staff development activities such as planning lessons together, exchanging ideas, or attending seminars organized by the education authority. Moreover, teachers are required to conduct open lessons which are attended by colleagues or even teachers from other schools. These practices emanate from, and are strengthened by, their collectivist values. The distinction is not totally clear, however, since when it comes to everyday lesson planning, teachers interviewed said they work fairly independently. Much of the rhetoric of the “new curriculum” includes references to enhanced team work whereby teachers are expected to prepare and teach integrated (sometimes termed interdisciplinary and sometimes transdisciplinary) curricula which cut across traditional disciplinary boundaries. It appears that of the teachers interviewed for this study, those from Mainland China would be most amenable to the integration and teamwork requirements of the “new curriculum,” while those from

Hong Kong would be culturally most resistant. The strong individualization of the Australian teachers might be seen as being inimical to increased team work, although the relative lack of importance attached to the mandated curriculum as compared with the needs of individual students might make the introduction of "new curriculum" approaches to integrated studies easier.

The masculinity-femininity dimension refers more to qualities of assertiveness, competition, and a focus on achievement than on specific distributions of roles between the sexes. Thus, regardless of the relative proportions of male and female teachers in Hong Kong, we may regard the culture of Hong Kong teachers as essentially masculine on the basis of the emphasis almost universally placed by Hong Kong teachers on teacher disciplinary leadership, achievement on examination success, and the competition inherent in public examination systems. Mainland China may be typified in a similar manner. Australia, however, despite its public image as a "blokey" society, is presented by these interviewees as having a relatively un-competitive education system in which teachers place their greatest focus on the needs of individual students, reducing their own assertiveness and placing relatively low emphasis on achievement, at least as externally measured and demonstrated.

Hofstede's fourth dimension of culture relates to uncertainty avoidance. It is obvious that the Changchun teachers are reluctant to venture into new curriculum measures without considerable support. Rather, they prefer to work within the safety of precise specifications, so instead of tailoring their curriculum to make it more relevant to their students, they adhere closely to the direction and stance mandated by the centrally developed curriculum and the textbook. Hong Kong teachers also prefer to avoid variations in the implemented curriculum, particularly those which deviate sharply from their usual practices and especially if such variations might affect the performance of students in the examination. Australians appear comparatively more ready to venture into new classroom approaches depending on their perception of their student's needs, and this readiness is justified on the grounds that if they are not prepared to vary their approaches, then even less might be achieved. The absence of any mechanism whereby the effectiveness of various teaching approaches or indeed teachers can be compared with either others or some centrally defined norm may be proposed as a major reason for this more *laissez faire* approach.

The final cultural dimension according to Hofstede relates to long-term and short-term orientations, with values

associated with long-term orientation being thrift and perseverance, and values associated with short-term orientation being respect for tradition, fulfillment of social obligations, and protecting one's "face." Of all Hofstede's dimensions, this is the one that has been least well illuminated in a variety of contexts, and on which we too find most difficult in differentiating between our three groups of teachers.

Hofstede found that a long-term orientation is most commonly found in Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea. In our own study, while both Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese teachers' focus on preparing for more advanced courses to follow, and on examination success in order that students may progress to higher level institutions in the future, reflecting their cultural orientation to the long-term, we find it hard to identify either any clear-cut long- or short-term orientation in Hofstede's terms in our Australian teachers.

Conclusion

While we acknowledge that not all Hofstede's dimensions can be identified with confidence in the few vignettes presented here, and that this small sample of teachers from three such different contexts cannot be statistically generalized, we believe that we have enabled conceptual generalisability. We believe that we have confirmed that these teachers from different geographical places demonstrate identifiable professional cultural differences even though they may appear to share some similar occupational culture traits. These cultural characteristics could easily be interpreted as deficiencies of the teachers. For example, teachers in Mainland China have been criticized as not having the abilities to develop school-based curriculum development. Teachers in Hong Kong have been labeled as "isolated workers" failing to bring out the synergy of team work. Australian teachers might be criticized for being too liberal and individualistic. However, criticizing teachers in these ways may be neither fair nor useful in promoting authentic educational improvement in the longer term. The cultural traits of a group are often built upon and develop slowly by a group to adapt to the social, political, economic, and administrative settings in which it finds itself. Perhaps asking teachers to adopt curriculum changes contradictory to their cultural traits is like taking fish out of water and being surprised that they have difficulty in adapting to their new environment.

Of course, in an increasingly globalizing world, it would be easy to argue that the whole business of educational and curriculum reform is precisely to change culture. Hofstede (1995) has pointed out that organizational culture could be changed with strenuous effort while changing the culture of a place would be much more difficult as it is so deep-seated, but perhaps this is no reason to abandon the enterprise. Before doing so, however, we believe that it is essential for the proposed change to be evaluated for both long-term and short-term costs and benefits.

What is worrying is that many governments are cloning educational and curriculum reform policies (Dimmock & Lee, 2000) without taking the culture of teachers in their particular places into consideration. Asking all teachers in Mainland China to develop school-based curriculum would be in sharp contrast to the culture of collectivism established since Communist rule. Similarly, Hong Kong teachers have accepted that their fundamental role is to help their students to succeed in the public examination which has been a “fair” competitive system. Does Australia really want to abandon its ethos of fair play in favour of increased stress and economic advantage? For teachers in each of these systems, requiring them to adopt work practices in contradiction to their cultural environment could bring about ideological conflict, the potential costs of which could well exceed the actual benefits claimed by their political leaders.

Notes

1. It would be very interesting to study and question whether introducing “a New curriculum” to places with very different economic, social, political and cultural background. However, under the constraints of resources, the present researchers have to focus on the culture of teachers in different places and its possible implications on the implementation of the new curriculum.
2. Changchun is an industrial city in the Northeast China. As China is such a large country, the study of a city should not be generalized as the situation in the whole country. However, Changchun can be taken as example of the large industrial city in the northern part of the country.
3. Dimmock and Walker elaborate this, “Hong Kong, ... although basically a Chinese society, has been ruled as a British colony for more than a century and a half and influenced by Western ideas and practices through government, religion, commerce, trade and tourism. Thus, the contemporary culture of Hong Kong is the result of elements of Western culture grafted on to an otherwise

historically ingrained Chinese culture.” See Dimmock and Walker (1998, p. 571).

4. In Hong Kong, there is no public examination at the end of the junior secondary years. Therefore the examination pressure is virtually non-existent at that level. However, all senior secondary students (i.e., Grade 10–11) have to face the Certificate of Education Examination, which is a high-stake public examination having strong impact on the students’ further study and career.
5. Teachers in Mainland China are required to conduct “open lessons” to demonstrate their teaching skills and new teaching ideas. As they are meant to be demonstrations, teachers usually make very elaborate plans and intentionally adopt more innovative teaching strategies and methods. As these researchers came from abroad, it would not be uncommon for teachers to prepare a “demonstration lesson” for the researchers. Accordingly, it was important that all the teachers represented by Mr. Au were informed that the researchers were interested in everyday teaching practices and invited to teach as usual. For details of “open lesson,” see Cheng and Wong (1996).
6. The Appendix at the end of this paper shows the teaching content and methods adopted by Mr. Au in comparison with the textbook and teacher’s reference book.
7. While Ministers of Education of all states and territories in Australia agreed on the eight key learning areas including Studies of Society and Environment in the early 1990s, each jurisdiction then developed its own syllabus. This has meant that SOSE syllabus documents in each state and territory are markedly different (making the notion of a national curriculum effectively untenable). In Queensland, the syllabus is set out as a series of loosely described “learning outcomes” to be addressed in the context of history, geography, citizenship, economics, and anthropology. However, teachers who take such classes are usually trained in either history or geography. In 2007, the Australian Federal Government has recently announced that it wishes individual states and territories to re-introduce history and geography as separate disciplines into the secondary curriculum.

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Appendix

Summary of points in the textbook, suggested teaching method in teachers' reference and points that Mr. Au, a junior secondary geography teacher in Changchun, covered in his lesson on railways in China.

Major points	Sub-points	Teaching methods suggested in teacher's reference book	Mr. Au
The achievements in railway building since the communist rule in 1949	The changes in railway lines	Contrast the differences between pre-communist and present situation by reading map	X
	The achievement in building new railways		X
	The renovation of the old railway lines	Ask students to read map and appreciate the difficulties by association	
	Appreciate the difficulties in building railway		
The south-north railway lines	Beijing–Harbin — Beijing–Guangzhou	Ask students to read map. First, identify the location of Beijing, then ask students to identify the south-north running railway lines	X
	Beijing–Kowloon		X
	Beijing–Shanghai		X
	Jiaozuo–Liuzhou		X
	Baoji–Chengdu — Chengdu–Kunming		X
The east-west railway lines	Beijing–Baotou — Baotou–Lanzhou,	Identify the routes by reading map	X
	Lianyungang–Lanzhou — Lanzhou–Xinjiang		X
	Shanghai–Hangzhou–Zhuzhou–Guiyang–Kunming		X
The major railway nodes	Identifying and locating Beijing, Zhengzhou, Xuzhou, Zhuzhou, Lanzhou, Chengdu	Read map. Identify the nodes and the railway lines which run through the nodes	X
The linkage between railway lines and natural resources			
Railway timetable	How to read railway timetable		X

X: teaching point covered in the lesson observed